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FOR THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST LADY
ALSO FOR NSC (JULIE FISHER, MATT PALMER)
DEPT FOR EUR AND EUR/WE

E.O. 12958: N/A
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UNESCO
SUBJECT: THE FIRST LADY'S JAN 14-17 VISIT TO PARIS

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Introduction

¶11. (U) The First Lady's visit to France comes at an ideal moment, just as the French are contemplating a generational change in their politics and reassessing their role in the world. The First Lady will be able to highlight our historic friendship, our effective modern-day collaboration, and our respect for France's cultural contributions. The First Lady will be warmly welcomed, in Paris and at UNESCO, and her visit's themes -- of education and advocacy for children -- will resonate strongly here.

A New Era of Collaboration

¶12. (SBU) When the First Lady last visited in 2004, France and President Chirac were still feeling emboldened by their opposition to our intervention in Iraq and Chirac's alliance of convenience with Germany and Russia. Since then, thanks to the efforts of the President and Secretary, and a bit of realism in France, the two countries have put aside their differences over Iraq in order to work more vigorously together on other international issues of particular concern: Lebanon; Iranian nuclear weapons; the humanitarian disaster in Darfur; and others. Differences remain, over our respective visions for NATO, Turkey's place in Europe, and how best to manage an increasingly authoritarian Russia, but the relationship overall is close and productive.

¶13. (SBU) The French remain keenly interested in whether and to what degree the President will modify our Iraq policy, but this interest will be overshadowed by the turbulent domestic political scene here in France, during the First Lady's visit. The campaign for the spring 2007 presidential elections enters into full swing with the new year. On January 15, the morning after the First Lady's arrival, Interior Minister Sarkozy will presumably be formally designated by the center-right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) as its presidential candidate. The other main presidential contender, Socialist Party candidate Segolene Royal, will be planning her first trip to the United States shortly after the First Lady's visit.

France's Upcoming Political Choice

¶14. (SBU) Many in France will assume -- given Sarkozy's recent trip to the U.S., where he met with the President and

called for a warmer relationship with the U.S. -- that the Administration is hoping for a Sarkozy victory. But France will also be interested in the First Lady's reactions to France's first electable female presidential candidate. The 2007 elections will mark a change of generations and, for the first time in many years, the two main political parties will be running candidates who insist they are outsiders and willing to shake up France's comfortable but underperforming status quo. The end of Chirac's tenure has been marked by considerable French uncertainty about the "French model" for integration and economic development (witness the November 2005 unrest in the suburbs and the student protests against labor reforms), its future within the European Union (France voted against the EU constitutional treaty), and the world (fears of the effects of globalization). The electorate's hopes are high that this election will mark a new beginning for France.

¶5. (SBU) President Chirac's agenda during his last months of office has been to maintain his own visibility in the one area where he can still have a public impact and maintains unmitigated decision-making control: French foreign policy. In recent months he has multiplied his announcements on new foreign policy initiatives (the latest being a proposal for creation of a Contact Group on Afghanistan) and given full rein to his politically popular "soft" initiatives in the areas of climate change, a tax on worldwide travel for HIV/AIDS, a proposal for a UN Environmental Organization, and what he terms the "dialogue of civilizations." He may personally chair the January 25 conference in Paris on Lebanon that Secretary Rice will be attending.

Our Shared Interests and Values

¶6. (SBU) The First Lady's meetings at UNESCO and her participation in the conference sponsored by Mrs. Chirac on missing and exploited children will form the centerpiece of the visit. At UNESCO, the First Lady will have an opportunity to highlight her role as Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade and build on the September White Conference on Literacy in New York. She will be able to present U.S. views on teacher training in Africa, and convey a message on the practical initiatives the U.S. sees as useful for the organization. Mrs. Chirac's conference offers a forum for conveying international solidarity on an issue that transcends the geographical, religious and racial boundaries that divide the world. President Chirac is scheduled to make opening remarks at this conference.

¶7. (SBU) The First Lady's visit will allow us to convey a number of themes to advance U.S. interests:

-- The U.S. and France are partners in addressing global challenges, be they Lebanese sovereignty and Iranian proliferation, or missing and exploited children. The value of our age-old friendship lies in what we do together in the world today.

-- The U.S. will work productively with whomever emerges from France's 2007 elections to lead this key ally, and we rejoice in France's vibrant democracy, the roots of which intertwine with our own.

-- President Chirac's legacy in the international arena is significant and we salute his leadership role over his many years in office.

-- Our commitment to UNESCO is rooted in the important work that organization has at this critical time, in particular with regard to its educational mandate.

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